PRIDE: OUT OF TOUCH WITH REALITY?

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1. Introduction

Contemporary theological anthropology has broadly come to understand the human person in terms of relationship. Consequently, it could be said that the sinner is “a person without relationships”. Augustine sees sin as pride and in this he is joined by Luther and Barth (who also includes falsehood and sloth). The metaphor, *homo incurvatus in se* is used to cover sin generally but is especially apt to describe pride for it means a person curved in on one’s self, a person turned towards one’s self and away from God and others.

There are certainly Scripture passages, especially in the Old Testament, that support a focus on pride as the cardinal sin. I shall give a few examples. Pride motivates the desire to build the tower of Babel. “Let us make a name for ourselves…” (Genesis 11:4). In Jeremiah 13:10 stubborn disobedience is linked to pride. “This evil people who refuse to listen to my words, and follow the dictates of their hearts…” In the Book of Job (35:12) God does not answer the call of evildoers. “Then they cry aloud, but he does not answer because of man’s base pride”. In the Book of Proverbs (16:18) we read: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall”. Sirach 10:13, a passage much used by Augustine and quoted many times in his numerous works states:

\[
\text{The beginning of human pride is to desert the Lord,}
\]
\[
\text{and to turn one’s heart away from one’s maker.}
\]
\[
\text{Since the beginning of pride is sin,}
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\[
\text{Whoever clings to it will pour forth filth.}
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In this paper I will first treat of pride (and humility) in a non-scriptural, secular and literary context. A rich source of theological analysis from Catholic tradition is that of human experience: “The Word became flesh, he lived among us” (Jn1:14). The God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ shared our sinful human condition in order to lift up and heal that which is enslaved to sin. The seeds of the Logos (*Logos spermatikos*) are scattered everywhere and hence secular reality is not unrelated to the spiritual.

Iris Murdoch, a twentieth century English novelist comes close to the Christian tradition in her analysis of pride and humility. Her respect for reality and hence for truthfulness permits her to exercise a critical function with regard to current liberal, secular ideology aspects of which she shares but will allow to be only partial aspects of a wider reality. Thus the liberal political viewpoint cannot account for moral and hence spiritual progress which varies from person to person. Murdoch really respects the uniqueness, difference and the essential dignity of each human person. Humility becomes for Murdoch a just discernment of each particular person’s level of competence. We need to attend to the particularity of that which is under judgment. We are all fallible, yet perfectible agents who in accordance with that which (truthful) assessment should aspire to our own unique moral level and not beyond it.

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1 Jenson, M., *The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on Homo Incurvatus in Se*, 2
According to Augustine the dynamic involved in our human actions is toward a perceived good. We activate ourselves in order to possess or participate in the good. In other words, love is the shape that we give to our desires. The fundamental question is: what is the object of our will or of our desires? It is that we move towards that which we love. As a consequence of the Fall, however, two sorts of men are revealed. Though born of the same parents and sharing the same nature they are characterized by two dissimilar wills. Thus Adam’s offspring, Cain and Abel, are men who share the same nature but reveal two divergent or dissimilar wills or loves. This distinction is displayed throughout history but shall be fully revealed at the Last Judgment. As long as the world lasts, then, the lovers of earthly things (an inversion to love of self, that is, pride) and the lovers of heavenly things (love of God and neighbour) are fused together. However,

According to Augustine[ the lovers of earthly things] also possess a distinctive form of imitation, love, and therefore unity. But this imitation is perverse, being both ‘privative’ and ‘separative’. It is ‘privative’ [because] it induces [humanity] to seek their good within themselves. This self-love is also ‘separative’ in as much as it alienates and divides each member both from God and his neighbour.  

This shift in love from God to self is the basic form of sin. In terms, then, of Augustine’s analysis, this primal form of sin is correctly named pride as it is the basic form of self-love. As we turn away from God, love of self becomes the organising principle of our lives.

Kathryn Turner in her book, *Jesus, History and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (1993) written to counter what she would regard as the excesses of certain feminist theologians exemplified by Daphne Hampson’s *After Christianity*, proposes a counter-dominative and non-competitive relationship between God and the created order. The radically transcendent God is rather the source of all goodness and giftedness. In our human response to this God we can locate sin. With her twin metaphors of ‘blockage” and ‘blindness” Turner provides a very contemporary understanding of *homo incurvatus in se* as the primal sin of pride. Pride, in her exposition becomes a delusion, (an unreality) about our human condition.

2. Murdoch on pride and humility

Iris Murdoch, the twentieth century English novelist, helps us situate pride in relation to reality in a more secular sense than does Augustine as we shall see in the next section. Nevertheless she is in continuity with aspects of the Augustinian tradition. Murdoch views

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2 St. Augustine , *City of God*, XV, 1  
3 McQueen, D., “The Origin and Dynamics of Society and State according to St. Augustine”, 100  
humility not as “a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like an inaudible voice”\(^5\) but rather as a respect for reality, that is, a commitment to truthfulness.

Murdoch does acknowledge, on the one hand, that pride is important to us- the pride in ours and others accomplishments. Tony Milligan in his article on “Murdochian Humility”\(^6\) introduces a distinction between what he terms “recognition pride” and “self-sufficient pride”. By the former he means “an emotional recognition of accomplishment”, by the latter “haughtiness or conceit” which he states is “always a moral cognitive failure”.\(^7\) Humility serves the purpose, then, of avoiding what for Murdoch would be the moral danger posed by overestimation.\(^8\)

Murdoch’s idea of the “good” is totally “beyond”, as it were, incapable of definition, or of discernment. In Michael Meade’s sermon in Murdoch’s novel, *The Bell*, it is stated that “The chief requirement of the good life … is that one shall have a conception of one’s capacities. One must know oneself sufficiently to know what is the next thing”.\(^9\) Murdoch has no truck with contemporary virtue ethicists, for “imitatio Christi does not work simply by suggesting that everyone should give away his money, [or] of wondering how Christians will vote”.\(^10\)

The point is that we humans (i.e. sinners) are not the same. Virtue ethics will not happily realise that the requirements placed upon individuals are often impossibly difficult for everyone to meet. Murdoch’s approach, therefore, requires that fallible human agents act at their own moral level and never beyond it. We are required to act in accordance with our own humble assessment. Milligan expresses Murdoch’s thesis in these words, “Taking on more than we can cope with, without special legitimising reasons for doing so, amounts to an overestimation of self (i.e. pride), and is a familiar fault.”\(^11\)

Murdoch understands that there is a moral growth or a moral progress and that therefore moral competence varies from person to person and is not what we might term a universal default condition. Consequently, while liberal in her political persuasions, Murdoch implies that a liberal political standpoint has been allowed to distort the concept of the self. In other words, political concepts can distort aspects of reality when they flow over into a context where they are no longer appropriate – a very common contemporary “happening” and a cause of much disquiet.

In conclusion, then, humility, as opposed to pride, is tied to a radical realism for it aims in varying degrees to discern our own particular levels of moral competence. Allied to realism and consequent truth, humility assists the individual and more widely the societal collective not to overestimate, not to overextend, nor make inappropriate comparisons, nor to judge by

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\(^5\) Murdoch, I., *The Sovereignty of Good*, 95


\(^7\) Ibid., 220

\(^8\) Murdoch is in line with Aquinas: “the proper role of humility is for a man to restrain himself from being carried away by craving things above him. For this it is necessary that he should recognise where his abilities fail to match that which surpasses them… [and] not reckoning ourselves to be above what we are”. [Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol 44, 2a2ae.161.2.161.6]

\(^9\) Murdoch, I., *The Bell*, ch.16


\(^11\) Mulligan, T., “op.cit”, 228
inappropriate standards. Murdoch’s different levels of moral competence allows place for a limited form of pride (i.e. recognition pride) on the one hand and a humility grounded in realism and consequent evolving spiritual and moral consciousness on the other hand. Additionally, Murdochian humility is a safeguard against excessive moral demandingness. Imperfect, fallible human beings must act in accordance with their own moral givenness and not beyond it.

3. Augustine: Pride- the cardinal sin.

Augustine sees sin as essentially pride and although he does not use the metaphor, his relational understanding of humanity allows him to identify the sinful human with *homo incurvatus in se*, that is, the human turned towards self and away from God and others. Augustine sees the whole course of human created existence as a conflict of two loves: what has been called “a metaphysic of will.” With profound psychological insight, Augustine surveys the complexity of the human psyche with its variety of loves. Hardy comments:

> He sees mankind as occupying a battlefield between two loyalties heavenly and earthly; the self-denying love of God and the God-denying love of self.

Every area of human life is a spiritual field of battle.

According to Augustine, then, the orientation of our loves will define who we are and who we will become, that is, our identity. We are essentially dynamic persons: we move towards that which we love. Sin is an inversion, a shift in the love and delight of God to the self. Augustine in commenting on the fall of the angels writes,

> They have chosen pride in their own elevation in exchange for the true exaltation of destiny, empty cleverness in exchange for the certainty of truth; the spirit of faction instead of unity in love.

When we turn away from God the love of self becomes the organising principle of our lives. But, the love of self, pride, the primal sin, is an unreality. “Sin’s characteristic mark is self-serving aversion: sinners turn their faces away from God and attempt, narcissistically, to look only at themselves.” Self-love is false love, a misguided love, an unreality for the self has nothing to give other than to glorify God, the source, end, and ground of our being. Apart from God there is no reality: nothing within creation in Augustine’s view can become the basis for a life turned away from God. Evil, non-being, cannot exist as a reality that can be loved and aspired after. Expressed differently, pride entices us to make ourselves the ground of our own being and

> the source of our own happiness,[but] we cannot succeed, for we have nothing to give ourselves other than our reality as creatures whose

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12 Burleigh, J., *City of God: A Study of St. Augustine’s Philosophy*, 154
14 St. Augustine, *op.cit.*, X111.1
true happiness is in God alone, which is exactly the opposite of what pride seeks. We would expect, then, that pride will fail, and in failing, it becomes not the opposite which is humility but instead the perversion of a perversion, the undoubted futility of slavery to idols of our own fabrication.\(^\text{16}\)

We are made for God: “You stir man to take pleasure in praise of you because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”\(^\text{17}\) Expressed in contemporary parlance we are hardwired to desire to rest in God and not in ourselves. Pride which is self-deceptive, an unreality, allows us to clothe the finite in divinity: to see in the finite an ultimate end. As we turn inwards in pride the illusion of divinity and transcendence is created.

Augustine in his *Confessions* is at pains to show that his life was organised around this self-love or pride. Augustine shows how he directed his life prior to his conversion according to his own volitions which were directed by his own genius and his own judgments. Accordingly he was a slave to the objects of his own desire, to his own fabrications, to the idols of his own creation. The futility of pride, of self-love lies in our being made for love (God). Consequently we lack the capacity to live according to our own design, our own self, our own individuality. Augustine expresses the futility of this inversion in these words: “The soul fornicates when it turns away from you and seeks outside of you the pure and clear intentions which are not to be found except by returning to you”.\(^\text{18}\)

In conclusion self-love or non-being is an unreality for Augustine, a psycho-spiritual disorder profoundly affecting both our personal and communal existence. This existence, then, becomes dominated by the lust for power and self-love which is sought in a multiplicity of intense but incomplete loves. Speaking of Augustine, Peter Brown notes,

... for him, man is so indeterminate, so discontinuous, so blind in his intentions and haphazard in his attempts to communicate, that he must be determined by some force outside the horizon of his immediate consciousness- for Augustine, of course, by God.\(^\text{19}\)

Augustine’s “disordered will” and the “variety of loves” provides an awareness of both the individual and social nature of pride or sin. All our actions reveal the quality of our loves.

4. **Tanner: A contemporary approach**

In the last section we surveyed Augustine’s profound psychological insight into the complexity of the human psyche with its variety of loves and the tendency towards inversion

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\(^{16}\) Reno, R.R., “Pride and Idolatry”, 174

\(^{17}\) St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 11.6

\(^{19}\) Brown, P.R.I., *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine*, 28
or pride. Before moving on to more contemporary, more democratic considerations exemplified by Tanner, I propose to turn to Thomas Aquinas who observes that the humble person as opposed to the proud “in respect of that which is his own ought to subject himself to every neighbour in respect of that which the latter has of God’s”. Here Aquinas is proposing that that which God has created in other people ought to be respected. According to Aquinas the Christian virtue of humility is analogous to some degree to the classical pagan virtue of great-soulness. Thus, humility for him lies in tempering one’s passions in pursuing goods difficult to achieve. True humility, then, has a democratic quality, for to be humble is to have a respect for the opinions of other humans who have in varying degrees imbibed of God’s truth.

Kathryn Tanner’s book, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity; a Brief Systematic Theology* (1993) develops a contemporary theological notion of sin (pride) that does not jeopardize either human freedom or integrity. Tanner’s concept of sin (or pride) is directly related to her concept of God: sin denies or opposes the self-giving nature of God. In sinful pride human “block” or are “blind” to God’s divine self-communication of goodness to themselves and others. She discerns God’s purpose in creation especially in the creation of humankind as being the communication of divine goodness:

> God’s glory really consists in his self-giving, and this has its centre and meaning in God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and that the name of Jesus Christ stands for the event in which man, and in man, the whole cosmos is awakened, and called and enabled to participate in the being of God.

Tanner further helps to structure pride as a non-reality somewhat analogous to Augustine. In her theology of creation God and human beings exist in a non-competitive relationship to one another. God is radically transcendent of our creaturely realm: God is the source of all goodness. “The creature in its giftedness, in its goodness, does not compete with God’s giftfulness and goodness because God is the giver of all that the creation is for the good.” Indeed, the greater our dependence upon God, the more we become receptive to that which is for our good. The point is that divine power or the divine agency operates on a different plane from human causality: God, rather than competing with human power transcends the human agency. There is no divine domination over finite human beings. As noted earlier, Tanner uses two metaphors for sin, that is, “blockage” and “blindness”. In the former humans restrict the divine self-giving by “blocking” the gratuitous flow of the divine gifts to themselves and others. In the latter humans close their eyes to the reality of God’s good gifts. This closure becomes a self-deception, an unreality as we are creatures dependent upon God for our true identity. In our sinful pride we are deluded about our true

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20 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, illa illae., q 161, a3
21 See: 1Cor2:12 “…we have received the Spirit that comes from God, to teach us to understand the gifts that he has given us”.
22 Thomas Aquinas, op.cit., illae. illae, q161,a1
23 Tanner, K., *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology*, 46
24 Ibid., 37
25 Ibid., 3
identity. For Tanner the consequences of sin are dire. “Our sins interrupt the reception and distribution of the free flow of divine gifts, bringing suffering and death in our train”.26

5. Conclusion

This analysis of pride began by relating it to the metaphor of sin as homo incurvatus in se, a person curved in on self. Jensen in his The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on Homo Incurvatus in se, maintains that this metaphor provides a comprehensive paradigm for understanding sin. This incurvature is one in which sinful humanity “asserts a sort of gravitational pull, seeking to suck all others into its orbit”.27 Our analysis has confirmed the negative, unreal, unsustainable nature of sinful pride.

According to Augustine the rational creature that is humanity, is part of a cosmic structure rising from the inanimate, through life, to intelligence, and finding its apex in God the Creator.28 Every creature endowed with reason, if he is to meet his end, must observe a hierarchy of loves that must correspond to the order of goodness and being. Disorder, consequently, is the corruption of order and occurs when the hierarchy of loves is reversed or inverted as occurs in sinful pride: from God, the apex, to the self. For Augustine, then, sin (pride) or non-being is a pyscho-spiritual disorder profoundly affecting both the personal and communal existence of humanity. The human is his inverted, disorientated love seeks his ground within himself. This is a false love, has no truth and cannot be successful. In so far as creatures turn away from God as their highest end, “their activity must be futile”. 29 For Augustine there is nothing in creation that can ever become a basis for the sinful life for evil, non-being, cannot exist as a reality to be loved and sought. What may we conclude from Augustine about sin (pride)? Pride because it has no basis in reality and hence no basis in truth must always fail. Moreover, self-love is unstable because it seeks love in the self and we are unable to rest in ourselves as our end.

Murdoch, too, finds pride grounded in unreality. Goodness, being itself, is beyond any conceivable discernment. We are always pilgrims in via as it were. Goodness cannot be defined in terms even of the best pilgrims: goodness is forever beyond. We need in humility, then, to make only a just discernment of our own particular level of competence and not to overestimate, to overreach by making the wrong sort of comparisons. There are so many different levels of moral competence that we cannot attain the standards that our moral judgments may presuppose. In order, then, to avoid moral demandingness leading to pride we may only safely act in accordance with humble assessment.

Tanner, too, would confirm the non-reality of pride. All humanity is dependent upon the communication of the divine goodness: in our utter dependence on a transcendent God humans are the constant recipients of divine goodness and plenitude. The divine-human

26 Ibid., 86
27 Jensen, M., op. cit., 4
28 St. Augustine, op. cit., X1, 28
29 Ibid., X11, 8
communication is grounded in God’s grace and ceaseless giftedness. All is gift: consequently pride is unreality. Sin itself is “blockage” and “blindness” (non-being, separation from the giftedness of God. Sinfulness, moreover, is a self-deception concerning our status as creatures and a delusion about our true identity, our true condition, and in its wake comes suffering and despair.

In conclusion and in full agreement with Reno, has not modernity and post-modernity taught us rest in ourselves as our highest end and good- latter-day Pelagians? Are we not in danger of exchanging freedom and reason, the fruits of the Enlightenment for bondage and slavery? Pride turns inward: it closes us, locks us within ourselves and prevents our openness to the wonder, delight and creativity of the divine plenitude.

We are made for love, and our desire to give ourselves away, not to draw in upon ourselves, as the source and goal of our happiness. For this reason, we lack the capacity to live according to our own lights or for the sake of our own nature, and even less for our own individuality.

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